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AUTHOR Blackburn, Richard D.
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ABSTRACT

The role of the college student union is discussed in this review of what makes a union successful. It is suggested that the truly successful one combines the concepts of unifying force, common meeting ground, and community in order to educate as well as generate revenue. Issues considered include: hiring and training employees; competition with local businesses; matching activities with student interests; diversity of programs to combat racism and changing demographics of college student bodies; facility space; bans on alcohol; safety and security issues (e.g., date rape, AIDS, smoking bans); food service; revenue generation services (e.g., copy centers, video stores); and outlook for the future. (LB)

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Back to basics

Unions reaffirm their campus roles

The truly successful ones combine the concepts of unifying force, common meeting ground, and community to educate as well as generate revenue.

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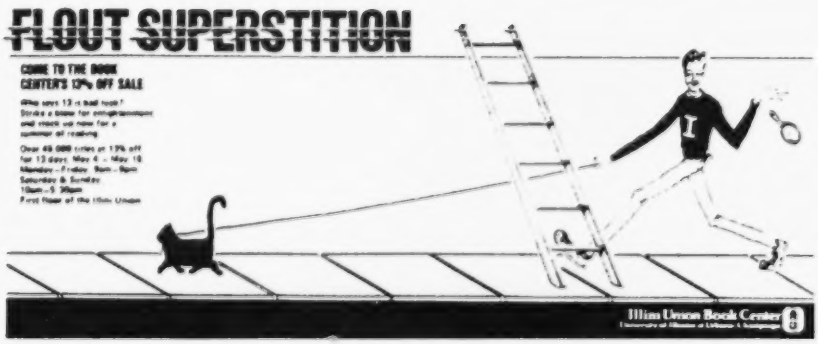
HE021 302

Richard D. Blackburn

These are uncertain times. If organizations, like people, can experience identity crises, then that may best describe the state of many college unions in 1988. In recent years, as institutional budgets have squeezed tighter and tighter, the college union pendulum has swung heavily toward an emphasis on revenue generation. Many unions have become fragmented, with organizational wedges driven between union business and student development components. Often lost in the process have been the historic concepts that embody the *total* college union—unifying force, common meeting ground, community center, total education.

A philosophical reawakening seems to be occurring. College union people are voicing a desire for refocusing of mission and expressing aspirations to move back to the basics which have underpinned the college union movement for over a century and a half. There are some hopeful signs that more institutions are valuing the union's role as a true community center and seeing the union as an important link with student recruitment and retention programs. There is an encouraging message in the growing number of college unions that are into major facility improvement programs. And there is a renewed awareness among union professionals that the truly successful union must preserve the integrity of the educational component while also being enlightened and capable in business and managerial functions. To shortchange either is unsound.



Hiring and training employees

Personnel problems seem to be occupying more managerial time and attention. A shrinking pool of student employees, especially in food service, perplexes many union managers. In some large union food operations, food units were hard pressed to open for the fall term because of insufficient help, even at $6.50/hour in one case. Foreign students are being heavily used as a dependable labor source. The Michigan Union recruited food service help by distributing "Now Hiring" fliers, listing pay and benefits. Benefits in-

cluded 10 percent off textbooks in the bookstore, 50 percent food discount on the days of work, and free passes to certain events. Jobs where study is permitted or where there is career preparation carry-over are more popular with students.

Unions are strongly emphasizing formalized employee training programs. After Wisconsin Union staff identified training as their No. 1 need, a new full-time position of training director was established. UCLA, Washington State, and Washington are in the process of developing similar positions. Some unions are successfully using video in staff training programs, and more attention is being given to employee handbooks and newsletters.

A university voluntary early retirement program will take one quarter of the Ohio State union's permanent staff by October of this year, and it is costing the union $140,000 per year for the next five years. State-supported institutions in Washington and Oregon report large pay equity increases resulting from comparable worth laws. The new federal immigration law, which requires submission of form I-9 to verify employment eligibility, is generating more recordkeeping for personnel offices.

Unfair competition

One of the past year's most talked about issues in college and university business management is private sector charges that institutional revenue production is competing unfairly. Bookstores, computer sales outlets, travel agencies, and certain research activities on college campuses have received the brunt of the criticism. Legislatures in at least 18 states have enacted laws or are considering legislation aimed at curbing alleged college abuse of their tax-exempt status. At the federal level, the House Ways and Means Committee is considering revisions in criteria for the unrelated business income tax (UBIT) on income-producing activities of nonprofit organizations.

Responses from colleges and college unions to the furor about unfair competition have been uneven. Many institutions do not have clear campuswide policies regulating their own income generation. The environment in which operations exist creates a major variable. Local private business pressures are more frequent for larger college unions with a variety of retail-type operations. And most frustrating are cases where unions are caught between institutional pressure to generate more income and warnings to not compete with private business.

What students do for fun

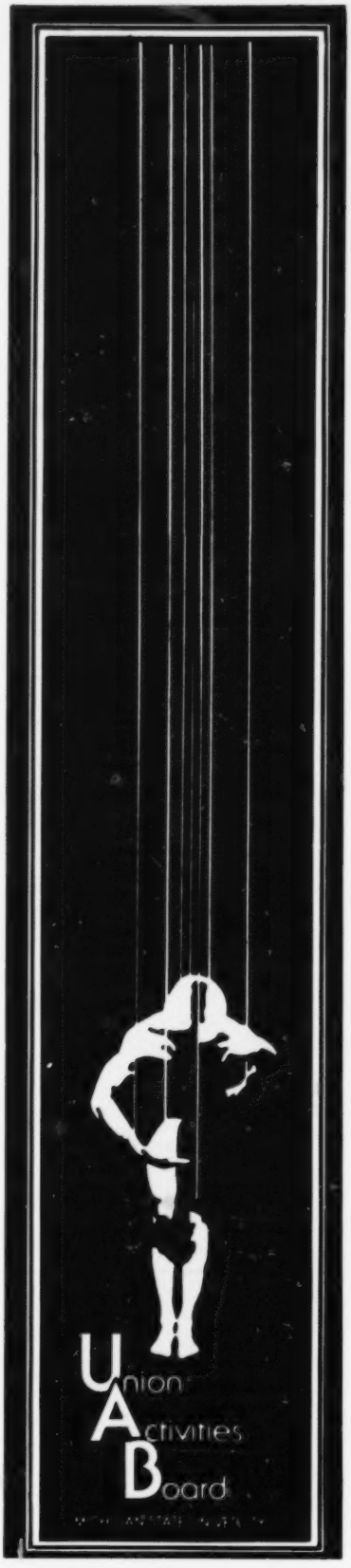
Are dances really coming back? Many unions think so and are reporting successful dance programs. At Kansas State, the union and residence halls cosponsor dances. North Texas State stages theme dances during holiday periods. Although homecoming kings and queens are reappearing on some campuses, other schools are debating the appropriateness of campus royalty. University of Idaho had 1,500 attend a non-alcohol homecoming dance, DePaul staged a highly successful homecoming dinner-dance, and Oregon State had its first homecoming dance in many years.

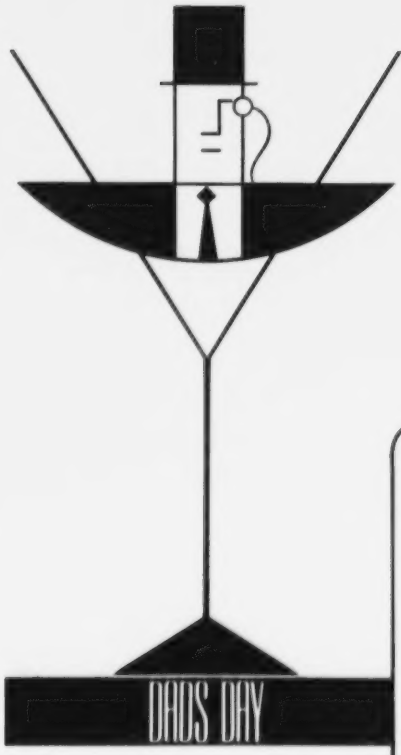
Comedy is the strongest entertainment form on college campuses, with small rock, jazz, and blues concerts also popular. The Wisconsin Union reports good response to a whole series of music/refreshment programs with such imaginative titles as Bagels 'N Bach, Mornings with Mozart, and Jazz Juggernaut. At the University of Sydney, Australia, 60 bands entered a rock band competition.

The Michigan State Union is presenting a series of dinner theater programs in the union ballroom. Innovative theme programs are being well received. Western Maryland presented a Banana Republic Weekend. Casino nights are in vogue. Mystery Dinners with participatory theater had a strong response at Indiana and Wisconsin. The Illini Union, University of Illinois, sponsors a travelogue dinner series. Participative programs are in, such as the highly successful game-show formats at Western New England College. The Student Video Network at University of Houston produces its own soap opera, titled "Student Union."

Diverse programs

Problems of racism continue to cause campus unrest, and there is increased interest in programming to





improve awareness. At Michigan, Jesse Jackson came in to help negotiate an agreement with the university. Campuses are reporting difficulties in meeting minority students' needs for a cultural center oasis, while also providing growth opportunities in the mainstream. Florida International University presents popular theme week programs highlighting various cultural groups.

Programs and activities reflect the changing demographics of college student bodies. Laramie County Community College reports a popular brown-bag lunch series with workshops on topics such as balancing family and school, divorce, and child custody.

Student volunteerism, particularly for a long-term commitment, is not strong. The most significant concerns of students are the cost of their education and the value of their degree upon graduation.

Lecture and debate programs seem to be gaining campus acceptance. The Wisconsin Union has received a 20 cent per student fee dedicated to a union-sponsored lecture program. Texas does a debate series, called Campus Crossfires, airing current student issues. Indiana's lecture series drew large crowds for such diverse speakers as the Dalai Llama, the director of the Kinsey Institute, and basketball coach Bob Knight. Maryland presented "The Great Drug Debate" with Abbie Hoffman and Timothy Leary to an audience of 1,300. Union film programs are reporting uneven degrees of success, ranging from dropping such programs entirely to solid growth on many campuses.

For some, gifts continue to be a lucrative source of financial support. The Wisconsin Union Theater, described by *Esquire* magazine as one of the most beautiful and acoustically perfect theaters in the world, has created a program endowment fund. With a goal of $500,000, the fund will be used to defray production costs and reduce ticket prices. Gift funds also supported a $300,000 remodeling of the Wisconsin Union lakefront terrace. At Indiana, a union board alumni project has provided a $75,000 Commemorative Garden and an endowment to provide perpetual care for the garden. Indiana union board alumni are now also providing seven student scholarships.

Space: A rare commodity

Union administrators, when queried about their biggest problem, almost always point to lack of space. The reasons are numerous. Most gratifying are cases of steadily increasing response to the union's role as campus community center. More people are coming, more events are occurring, but too often the building remains basically unchanged. Space crunches occur for other reasons. There are incursions into the union by others who covet the location,

such as the takeover of a Minnesota union lounge by the university credit union, or the rather common appropriation of union meeting rooms for university offices.

Space for programming, student organizations, and informal student use is being threatened by conflicting priorities, such as the expansion of income-generating facilities or growing use by university conference groups. Effective multiple-use of space is not emphasized like it once was, due partly to room setup costs. Union directors report more pressure for study space in the union, and some ask how far the union should go in responding to this need. "That's not what the union is for," said one. At the University of Toronto's Hart House, studying in a common room meant for conversation is listed as the union's biggest problem.

There is a noticeable increase in college union building rehabilitation, where dollars are available. For others, woes connected with maintaining an aging facility are a major problem. At the Big Eight union directors' meeting, every school reported renovation either in progress or in the planning stage. Purdue is nearing completion of a $5.4 million remodeling project. UCLA is spending $6 million on union renovation, including conversion of 10 bowling lanes to bookstore space.

Arizona State and Stanford are planning major additions. Recent renovations at Colorado State University have provided a new lab where students may rent microcomputers, an improved table service dining room, new University Club, updated student organization headquarters area, and an exterior sculpture garden. Squires Student Center at Virginia Tech is undergoing a $10 million expansion/renovation which includes a new performing arts facility. Coates University Center at Trinity University and Dobbs University Center at Emory University have both reopened after major improvement and enlargement.

A new $13 million student center recently opened at University of California–San Diego, Southern Methodist dedicated its new Hughes-Trigg Center in November, and Franklin Pierce College opened a new campus center last fall. Amherst College, which has abolished fraternities, has opened a new $7.3 million campus center, and Pembroke State University has dedicated a new $5.5 million University Center. Dean Junior College in Franklin, Mass., has created a new college center astride a former student "cowpath" that was a shortcut between the residential and academic parts of the campus.

"Space for programming, student organizations, and informal student use is being threatened by conflicting priorities, such as the expansion of income-generating facilities or growing use by university conference groups."

ACLU challenges ban on alcohol

Alcohol use continues to be a dominant campus problem and opinions are mixed on whether educational and awareness activities are making any significant impact. Football game tailgating and stadium drinking are growing in popularity, sometimes with athletic department or alumni association encouragement. At the University of Washington, the American Civil Liberties Union is challenging university attempts to ban stadium alcohol. Ball State University canceled a beer company-sponsored acrobatic team performance at a basketball game halftime. At Northwestern's Norris Center, alcohol service was shut down for 10 days after a rash of fake IDs.

A group of West Coast union directors noted some improvement in student alcohol abuse, but a group of New England deans said drinking has become more secretive and vandalism associated with alcohol consumption has increased. Most unions selling beer report that sales are down. University pressure for non-alcoholic bars continues, but frustration levels seem to be increasing in most unions because of low attendance, high costs, and little observable impact on the alcohol abuse problem. After state laws made imbibing illegal for most students, many college unions transformed their pubs into delicatessens, pizzerias, coffeehouses, or snack bars.

Some experts say that gambling among college students is becoming a serious problem. In the wake of some highly publicized incidents at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, school officials have established an on-campus gambling awareness program.

Safe and sound

There is a growing concern for matters of personal health and

safety, such as date rape, sexual harassment, and AIDS. Self-development programs, such as wellness, aerobics, yoga, and weight control, are well-received by students. Institutions are liberalizing their policies on condom availability. Vending machine, bookstore, or newsstand condom sales are common. Not entirely facetiously, one university city newspaper columnist dubbed 1987 the Year of the Condom.

Smokers are losing in the "rights" struggle with non-smokers in changing campus policies. No smoking, except in designated areas, is becoming common in many college unions.

Unions experiment with food service

One survey indicates that outside management companies operate two-thirds of all university food services; however, there still are many highly successful self-operated college union food services, particularly in larger unions. There is also still much food service managerial experimentation. After two and one-half years and three contract food service companies, the University of Missouri–Columbia has combined residence halls food with union cash and catering food operations to make one university department. Successful experiences with the establishment of university credit card systems for food service are frequent. Credit card access systems, using cards with magnetic strips or bar codes, are also being used to activate copy machines, word processors, washers and dryers, vending machines, telephones, and parking gates.

Major credit card companies are vigorously courting college students as customers. Small satellite food units, operated by unions in academic buildings and usually staffed by one person, are doing high volumes with high margins.

Union food courts with a common dining area are a clear trend, featuring hamburgers, pizza, seafood, chicken, salad, deli, and ice cream locations. Food catering continues to do well, with most unions reporting income increases. Consignment food, produced by an off-campus supplier, is prospering at the University of Oregon union, where oriental takeout items are most popular. UCLA calls its takeout program Tote Cuisine and packages its food in containers for either conventional or microwave reheating. The recent muffin craze is taking root on some campuses—huge, softball-sized muffins in varieties like apple spice, banana nut, bran, raisin walnut, and carrot.

Oregon State sells chocolate products and gourmet coffees in the Chocolate Treasury, and Wisconsin's waffle cone machine is a hot item. Macalester College sponsored a Chocolate Festival in cooperation with local restaurants. Mobile food units, strategically placed in campus traffic, take food service to the customers at Florida International University, Ohio State, and the University of Windsor.

Services that sell

In union recreation areas, billiards and game machines are increasingly popular, while bowling is struggling. Copy centers and video stores, usually on a leased basis, are having good success, and bank automatic teller machines are now common in most unions. The Ohio State Union has negotiated a 10-year ATM agreement with a bank, projected to be worth almost $2 million in income to the union.

UCLA has opened a packaging service, and Washington State rents display cases to local businesses for their advertising use. The Wisconsin Union has contracted with UPS to act as a drop-off for packages to be mailed. Idaho rents sound and light equipment, with operator, to campus organizations for use both inside and outside the union building. Post offices in unions at Georgia Tech, Mississippi State, and Michigan State are important traffic generators. Houston clears slow-moving stock from the bookstore and draws crowds at a flea market-type event called Bizarre Bazaar. The Michigan State Union microcomputer center offers use of computers and printers free to students, faculty, and staff.

The outlook

What lies ahead? A group of directors from large Midwest unions listed the following as major issues they anticipate in the next two years:

- shrinking student labor and rising wages
- food service problems
- competition with the private sector
- facility renovation
- multicultural issues
- financial adjustments to declining enrollments
- reaffirmation of college union purpose.

Clearly, as the college population becomes more diverse, college union programs, activities, and services must respond to this diversity. And this necessitates leadership from college union and student activities administrators whose skills and range of experience are also diverse. Success will go to the best prepared, the men and women whose commitment to being a union professional is authentic and intense.

Richard D. Blackburn is executive director of the Association of College Unions-International.